DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 165 099 CS 004 581

AUTHOR Winsand, Jean E.
TITLE Middle School Reading Focus: Content or Child?
PUB DATE Oct 78
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College Reading Association (22nd, Washington, D.C., October 19-21, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Development; *Class Management; Cognitive Development; *Curriculum Planning; Elementary Education; *Middle Schools; Models; Moral Development; Personality Assessment; *Reading Instruction; Reading Material Selection; Reading Programs; *Student Centered Curriculum; Student Characteristics
IDENTIFIERS Gordon (Chad); Kohlberg (Lawrence); Piaget (Jean)

ABSTRACT

According to recent research data, a successful reading program in the middle school requires a change in educational emphasis from content (skill orientation) to a curriculum determined by the cognitive, moral, and social-emotional development of the child. Three developmental models that provide tools for educators in developing such a curriculum include those of Jean Piaget, Chad Gordon, and Lawrence Kohlberg. Piaget's model provides a basis for deciding the cognitive level of reading content, while that of Gordon describes unavoidable value conflicts or crises in one's interaction with significant others. Kohlberg's model outlines definite stages of moral development related to an individual's cognitive development. In addition to developing a composite personality of the middle school child according to these models, the educator planning the reading curriculum must deal with two other variables, behavior (expected and actual) and environment. A classroom management model based on consideration of these variables provides realistic reading assignments drawn from the interest and cognitive levels of the individual student and it adjusts teaching methods, grouping processes, and supplementary materials according to the areas of a child's personality that are in need of growth and development. (MAI)

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MIDDLE SCHOOL READING FOCUS: CONTENT OR CHILD?

The middle school concept has been in existence long enough for us to be able to look critically at its accomplishments relative to its projected goals. Examination of the intent of middle schools discloses some very clear expectations. As early as 1965 Eichhorn (1965), after describing the transescent child, suggested that the solution to the problems of dealing with this "unique" person lay, not in adjusted grade patterns in the school, but rather in development of functional schools taking into consideration the psychological principles of readiness, maturation, knowledge of child growth and development and the cultural interaction of students.

Trauschke and Mooney (1974) reiterated this theme when they emphasized the need for middle schools to take full cognizance of the social and intellectual changes that are occurring in young people during the 10 to 14 year old span. They further stated that the major purpose of middle schools was the establishment of a facilitating climate to enable the transescent to understand himself and the changes in and around him. Given the literature supporting this concept of middle school, how are we doing at providing these unique programs?

Several experts in the area do not provide encouraging evidence. In a study conducted by William F. Koslick (1972), he observed that middle school teachers did not display a use of instructional modes in the classroom that differed from those used by junior high school teachers and that there seemed to be no significant differences between middle school and junior high school in terms of understanding the philosophical purposes, goals and actual practices

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of the middle school.

De Virigilio (1974) expressed deep concern over the trends in middle school as he also felt that they reflected a practice of simply carrying over to middle school the traditional practices of elementary and junior high school teaching.

Harvey (1974) pinpointed what may be one variable directly attributing to the concerns of persons who see middle school failing to meet the goals as he pointed out the ever-increasing attention being directed toward subject matter preparation of teachers. In his opinion, this emphasis on content has contributed to the development of teachers who concentrate on subject matter to the detriment of attention to the human beings who are supposed to learn the content.

Given the somewhat pessimistic tone of these reports and based upon the growing number of school systems using the middle school concept, I would suggest that the means to actualize the middle school concept are all at hand. It is necessary to determine what progress has been made and what changes need still to occur to arrive at the "functional school" described by Eichhorn.

First of all, the change from content emphasis to child emphasis must be effectively achieved. In most reading programs we still tend to make curriculum decisions based upon an evaluation of students which is skills oriented. The movement from achievement tests to criterion-referenced tests has not made notable changes in this process since the criterion-referenced tests are still skills oriented. Any prescriptive program based upon the results of these tests is obviously skill-oriented. Although some teachers use devices such as interest inventories to broaden their base of student information, few reading people have made use of more sophisticated processes

for determining the reading program content and process of middle school children. Reading programs based upon these traditional means of evaluation are therefore skill and content oriented.

It is imperative that retraining processes be implemented which support the change to child-oriented curriculum decision-making. Teachers need to be aware of the variety of developmental models which would enable them to determine the uniqueness of any child's stage of maturation. In addition, we need, as reading educators, to place much more value upon the validity of teacher observation as a legitimate curriculum decision-making base.

There are available a wide array of developmental models which would readily facilitate a change from the content orientation to a decision-making process which is child-oriented.

Some of the available developmental models which can be employed as tools include models of cognitive development, moral development, social-emotional development with emphasis on life crises and psychosocial development. All of these can be used as base points for determination of curriculum directions for an individual or a group of children.

A brief review of possible applications of several of these models to the reading instructor may be useful.

Because a major goal of our school systems is information giving, an obvious starting point would be in the cognitive area. Several cognitive models are available including Taba (1974), Bloom (1956) and the Piagetian model as explained by Phillips (1969). A popular reading comprehension development model, based upon Bloom's cognitive development taxonomy is the Barrett Taxonomy of Reading Levels (1967).

The Piagetian model has been popular and, despite much feeling that it

is complex and difficult to understand, it appears to hold great promise for the reading instructor.

The basic developmental stages are easily learned and teachers can develop easily observable lists of traits and evidences of student functioning in any given level. An example of a teacher's decision-making process based upon the Piagetian model should aid in making my point. The basic operations that are functional at the concrete operations level include combining, separating, repeating, dividing, ordering and substituting. If a teacher determines that a middle school child is still functioning at a concrete operations level she can expect him to be able, in a phonological context, to combine sounds to make words, to subtract sounds to make new words or morphs, to recognize sounds in a variety of contexts, to substitute one sound for another. Morphologically, he can combine morphemes to build words and enlarge words, move morphemes to restructure words, recognize that the placement of morphemes in certain order alters the meaning of words; and substitute one morpheme for another to produce meaningful word changes. Syntactically, the same operations become possible with sentence structures providing the same potential for student decision-making relative to sentence meaning. At a semantic or meaning level, the same expectations hold true. It is legitimate to expect a concrete operations level child to do certain operations with the meanings of reading materials. They can combine ideas to enlarge a concept, but will have difficulty using one idea to think about or change another idea. In the same way, students can be expected to pick a particular meaning from the total context, identify repetitions of basic themes, divide material into thematic or sequenced sections, identify sequence and substitute one meaning for another. It would be unreasonable to expect abstract dealing with ideas and meanings at this stage of development. Students will not

deal with logical relationships (ideas about ideas) and will not hypothesize in the abstract. They are still dealing with the concrete and need to be given structured, planned experiences to lead them toward formal operations levels of functioning. The Piagetian cognitive levels model is understandable and observable as a teacher decision-making model. It provides a basis for deciding the cognitive level of reading content for a middle-school child.

All of us are aware that, aside from physical development, the most notable developmental area for the middle school child is that of social development. Chad Gordon (1971) has developed an interesting life cycle model which suggests that at any particular life cycle there are identifiable significant others and that, as life contacts increase, the increasing number of significant others produces unavoidable conflicts or crises in terms of values.

Examining his chart applied to what might be described as a normal middle school-age child, 12-15 years of age, Gordon suggests that this child is now dealing with parents, same sex peers, opposite sex peers and teachers as significant others in his social interactions. The conflict of values should be obvious, but to clarify, it is fairly evident that, for most early adolescents the values held by parents and teachers may not be in total accord. Also, the values of same sex peers are not in agreement with those of opposite sex peers. A child who is moving toward an integrated adult personality must be experiencing great tensions as the various significant others press for conformity. Gordon's model suggests that the child is thus in a dilemma between achievement and acceptance in attempting to please all the groups. If he achieves to please parents and teachers, he may fail to be accepted by peers and vice versa. This is important to the teacher of reading in at least two ways. Teachers must

be sensitive enough to recognize that pressure to achieve to please the adult expectations may be unrealistic and in some ways unfair. Secondly, teachers must be very conscious of the tremendous import of motivation at this middle school age. Grades and adult approval may suddenly take a severe drop as motivating factors.

The middle school reading teachers must identify new motivations which are closely related to peer and personal approval. Reading materials must be closely related to early adolescent needs, such as career aspirations and teen-age life problems. Reading material, especially for problem readers, must be honest and must be clearly identified as being purposeful for achievement of closely-felt goals of early adolescents. It is legitimate and meaningful to a reader with problems to suggest that certain important goals, the driver's license, certain job goals, general everyday life problems, can become purposes for attending to the reading process. Such goals remove us from the traditional phonics-oriented approaches so often used in the past. Driver's manuals are not written at first or third grade levels, or in phonic language. Students are highly motivated to read these manuals, however. Dignity can be included in a reading program which recognizes the interests of a student of middle school age.

One more example of a developmental model with implications for the middle school child is Kohlberg's (1966) Moral Development Stages model. One of the most interesting aspects of this model is found in an article by Kohlberg and Gilligan (1971) which states that research seems to show that unless a person is able to function at a formal operations cognitive level as identified in the Piagetian model, it is not possible for him to function at the principled levels of moral decision-making. Given that our democratic form of government presumes a populace that, in majority, functions at those levels, this is a

sobering thought. It becomes particularly alarming when we examine the figures which suggest that nearly half of all American adults never reach a capacity for abstract thought. Seen in this light, we do have a strong responsibility (as level 5 and 6 functioning adults) to examine this model as another basis for decision-making. What are the implications for the reading teacher? A variety of moral dilemma materials have been developed. These uncompleted stories provide excellent opportunities for reading activities which enable students to extend meaning, make predictions, develop main ideas, to mention just a few reading activities. From another point of view, the moral dilemma material seems appropriate relative to the motivational aspect I suggested relative to Gordon's model. The dilemmas tend to be related to current real-life experiences of children and therefore, more motivational. Also, material for this approach is readily accessible. Newspapers, magazines (including People, Mad and similar popular publications) become excellent sources of moral issues. In a study done with young inner-city adult males who were, by and large, non-reading, Dolan (1976) used such materials to develop a program based upon a debate format. Students read controversial articles in current periodicals and debated the issues in a formal debate format. Reading scores increased and motivation jumped tremendously. In a mostly black population, a significant measure of the success of the process, was the discovery that the outcome of the debates had become the basis of a street-culture number game, and out-of-class betting was lively and profitable.

These three models have provided support for my premise that material is readily available to help us expand our curriculum decision-making processes. The problem, of which I am acutely aware, remains as to the classroom management of this type of decision-making process.

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Hunt and Sullivan (1974) in their text Between Psychology and Education have suggested a management model which seems to be very valuable for the middle-school reading teacher. It is their suggestion that a teacher deals ultimately with three major variables, behavior (both expected and actual), environment and personality. The models just shared have all provided various ways of describing the personality of a middle-school child. Applying this information to the Hunt-Sullivan model, a teacher can build a description of a child's personality as complex or as simple as desired. Once the personality is defined, the areas of behavior and environment are manipulable. Obviously, my value is that the reading behaviors expected of the student, will be based upon the description of the child's total personality. The cognitive nature of his assignments can be decided based upon a realistic appraisal of his present level of functioning. It is legitimate to expect that his reading materials would also support and encourage growth toward higher levels of functioning. Occasionally, a complete description of a child will clearly indicate that changes must occur in the behaviors we expect. The other obvious implication of this management model is the opportunity the teacher has to manipulate the environment. Teaching methods, grouping processes, materials utilized all become important decision-making variables in such a model. Finally, it is totally within reason to see this management model, as a way to determine the areas of a child's personality which are in need of growth and development.

Any number of other scales, models and theories are available for use in establishing a personality description for use in this paradigm. The point is that, once a satisfactory description is made, decisions concerning both the behaviors (in this instance, reading behaviors) and the necessary environmental

structures and modifications become much more manageable. It is possible to determine the content skills by relating the known quantities of the content field to a precise student description. This mode also presses teachers to respond to the "unique" descriptions of the students in the middle school.

Given the transescent nature of the middle school child and the basic character of the reading process, it seems valid to suggest that teachers of reading do, indeed, need to set the pace as child-oriented decision-making professionals. This approach appears to be defensible in terms of teacher accountability for, not only does content and process become individualized, but the reasons for arriving at these decisions are based on accepted developmental theories.

Cautions are in order. This approach to the planning process presupposes that teachers are trained in the necessary theoretical knowledges and in management/decision-making processes. It would be naive to assume that this process would be successful without such preparation. It is also necessary to suggest that the process not become bogged down in testing processes so common to the skills oriented approaches. It is, of course, possible to identify tests for the cognitive development levels and scales do exist for some of the other models. To make this process usable for teachers, however, it seems important to suggest that teacher observation skills be emphasized and refined and that more emphasis be placed upon observation as a legitimate decision-making process.

In conclusion, there is a plethora of material to support moving to student-oriented curricular decision-making in the middle school. If serious efforts can be made to aid teachers in developing skills in utilizing the available sources perhaps the present negative criticism of middle school programs can be corrected and we will truly see "unique" programs for students at a "unique" stage of development.

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